

The Storm King loomed over the room like an awful shadow, holding the staff firmly in both hands. Pale blue light radiated from a crystal at its tip, as though a single bolt of lightning was held back from striking perpetually. He seemed to ignore Golden completely, his attention focused mostly on Starlight.

"You're the one who defeated the crystal prison? I did wonder if somepony would manage it sooner or later. Not that it does you any good."

He walked right past her, up to where the tallest princess faced him. Celestia was defiant—but despite her size and that sharp, powerful horn, she didn't so much as smack him. "We squeezed the magic out of them like a sponge, unicorn. All right here, in the staff. What were they going to do to help you?"

He spread out both arms in front of Celestia, though kept the staff firmly in one hand. "Go on, *princess*. Do your worst. I'm wide open!"

Her horn sparked, little golden threads arching down her forehead. Then she whimpered, dropping her head with a strangled gasp of pain.

"Exactly. Nothing they can do. Unless one of you other *immortal* Alicorns want to try. You've been trapped for years now; you must've been *dying* to try."

"They didn't experience time," said Tempest, rising shakily to her hooves from the far wall. Her armor was dented now, and she walked with a limp. Yet, she stood up, despite the considerable force Golden Wind used to stop her. Downright impressive, in its own way. Shame she was evil. "They couldn't plot anything, King."

"See?" He gestured with his other hand in Tempest's direction. "Didn't even get to plot. Doesn't matter how smart or wise or powerful they used to be. They can't save you. Even the most powerful ponies you'd ever heard of couldn't stop me from ruling. Because I was *born* for it."

Tempest joined the Storm King, sparing only a glance at Golden Wind. There was enough hostility there to know some awful torture would be waiting for him—if he even lived through the next few minutes.

He took another small step closer to Starlight. Maybe he couldn't protect her from a being as powerful as this, but he wasn't going to back away and hide, either.

Golden wondered about his teammates. He couldn't see them on the other side of the room. Were they still moving? Maybe they'd been killed in the blast, or maybe they were just lying where they had fallen, to avoid another attack.

Either way, no one else was left standing to help him fight the Storm King. Starlight's spell took all the strength she had, so she was barely even *conscious*. The Alicorns were so drained of magic, that they could only watch, with their faces suggesting a heavy dose of painkillers. or many days without sleep.

The Storm King spun in a slow circle, right past Golden. "This was the last shot you had. My army is already mopping up the stragglers outside. We'll ship them all off to work camps in the far corners of the world, and my rule will be secure. Eternal, profitable rule."

He faced Starlight again, his expression twisting into a smug, satisfied grin. "I hope you're happy with your failure. Don't worry—I'll make a special place for you in the gallery. You may not be an Alicorn, but you've done a service nonetheless. Maybe I'll have my servants wake you all to entertain at parties every now and then."

Golden Wind could wait no longer. The Storm King was as close as he would ever be, his staff held towards him. He lunged, using the speed he'd perfected on the football field. From stillness, he lurched into motion, flapping both wings powerfully to clear the distance. He moved impossibly fast, almost too fast to see.

But it was not too fast for the Storm King. He turned on Golden, pointed the staff in his direction, and lightning arced. Sound burst through his eardrums, and power like nothing he'd ever felt coursed around him, burning everything it touched. Yet he wasn't thrown—his armor did its work, curving most of the incredible power out of the way.

His body spasmed, pain screaming in every limb, demanding that he submit, but he didn't. Golden Wind leapt into the air, flying *directly* at the Storm King. He could barely even think anymore, and he didn't try. All that mattered was his target—the blue light at the center of the Storm King's staff.

He struck a second later, bringing his hoof down hard on the crystal at the top. He heard nothing anymore, not with blood dribbling down his ears, and barely saw anything—but he felt the crystal splinter under his hoof, then shatter.

Magic exploded through the air, throwing him backward across the room with the force of a small bomb. He hit the wall a second later, then crumpled beside the trophies and broken windows.

His world turned hazy, black at the edges. Somepony rushed towards him—Starlight, her mouth open in horror. Behind her, the Alicorns no longer looked pale and faded.

But before they could rush forward to meet the horrified Storm King, Golden Wind's pain and injuries finally overwhelmed him. He flopped sideways, and his eyes closed. At long last, he could rest.

For a time unknown and unheard, Golden Wind floated in blissful oblivion. There was no time, no space—only peaceful rest for his badly damaged body. He dreamed a great deal—of crystal trees, lightning storms, and roaring winds. He then saw the Storm King's furious face, just as the tyrant realized what Golden was doing.

His sleep was not eternal, however. Eventually, he felt himself rising, like a struggling swimmer fighting their way to the surface. He gasped and spluttered, and finally, his eyes opened.

The storm was gone—the whole throne room, in fact. Golden Wind was in a stone room, with a large glass window beside him, and a high ceiling above. *The Castle of the Two Sisters? We're back in the hideout?*

He was on his back, stretched under thin blankets, with medical equipment beeping steadily on one side. Only instead of an annoyed Dr. Horse, the one standing over him was...

"I believe that's done it. Are you with us, Golden Wind?" Princess Celestia asked. Despite her size, the Alicorn's voice was as smooth as fresh honey, and as graceful as the curls of her mane, which radiated behind her in a curtain of pink, yellow, and green, more like light than hair.

"Golden!" Something lurched against him from the other side—a pair of hooves and a familiar scent. He looked slightly to the side, where Starlight now stood over him. "We didn't know... all that magic..."

He touched his forehead against her cheek. Even that took considerable energy. "Good to... see you too."

"I've restored your body," Princess Celestia said. "Though I advise you to be cautious with weather magic until you've had some time to adjust. You were exposed to more magic in an instant than most ponies will experience in their entire lives. There are bound to be... side effects."

Castle, sunlight outside, Princess Celestia only a few feet away. Golden Wind took a few seconds to process all that, and what it might mean. But for something so important, he couldn't rely on implications or guesses—that wasn't good enough. He had to know for sure. "The Storm King, did he..."

"He's gone," Starlight said, into his ear. "He won't be a threat to Equestria ever again."

"You released our magic," Celestia said. "After that, the battle was... brief." A grim smile flashed across her face, so subtle that Golden could've missed it. He could imagine, though. The deposed princesses of Equestria, facing down the creature who subjected their nation to such pain? Brief indeed.

"As I said, I've repaired the damage to your body. After you've had time to recover, Princess Twilight will visit you. She's our resident magical expert, and should be able to facilitate your return home with your armored brothers. With whatever compensation was promised, of course."

She turned away, gathering her wings against her side like a swan might. "Equestria owes you a great debt for your assistance. But my labor is required elsewhere—I have a country to rebuild." She didn't walk away, but vanished in a flash of golden light.

That left the two of them alone, with Starlight just beside his bed. "Did you see what happened? During the fight?" Starlight asked, eventually breaking the silence. "How you survived all that magic?"

He shrugged. "I didn't see very much of... anything. Just lightning."

Starlight paced along the cot, then levitated the thin blanket aside to expose his flank. Sure enough, the body beneath was no longer burned—Princess Celestia's magic had rejuvenated whatever damage the Storm King's lightning had inflicted.

But there was one thing she didn't put back to the way it was—a mark on his side. What the locals called a "cutie mark". "None of my... teammates have one of these," he said, breathless. "How?"

The mark was bright gold, with several prominent feathers surrounded by wisps of pale wind in swirling, energetic lines. He'd already tried to wash it off, without effect. The mark had grown right into his fur, as much a part of his body as his feathers or wings.

She shrugged. "I've never seen a transformed creature with a mark. And believe me, I know more about cutie marks than most ponies. More than I should." She sighed, settling the blanket back into place. "Getting your mark is the most important moment in a young pony's life—the moment you discover what you can do, and decide how to live your life. I wonder what you'll decide?"

She stood up again, pacing slowly around his bed, past the instruments to the other side. She settled onto her haunches beside him, low enough that she could reach over and lean down, right next to his cheek. "Twilight Sparkle could send you home. Change you back to how you were. But she doesn't have to."

She dropped a little lower, just beside his ear. "You're a hero to Equestria. If you stay, you could be a hero to me, too."

A few weeks ago, he would've refused without thinking. But Golden Wind was a different pony now. Even Equestria had recognized him. "I like the sound of that."

He kissed her, or tried. Golden's body might've been magically rejuvenated, but he still felt weak. He would need a long, long sleep before he was up and going again.

Starlight helped.

But it couldn't last, because at that moment, the doors banged open. Several familiar ponies rushed in, now wearing bandages instead of golden armor. His teammates were a little singed from the Storm King's attack, particularly around the joints where their armor's segments met.

The personal healing treatment was reserved for him, it seemed.

"No way!" Harvey said, crowding up close to the bed. "You're already better?"

"Yeah, no way!" Carlos nudged the blankets lower, as though his neck and shoulders would be much worse than the rest. But there were no burns anywhere, nor any melted feathers. Princess Celestia knew what she was doing.

Danny whistled loudly. "You were a roast chicken when they brought you in here. Straight up barbequed. We didn't think you'd make it."

*Probably for the best I lost consciousness*, Golden thought. "Wasn't quite ready to die quite yet," he said, sitting up. "Had to make good on my promise to all of you. Get Equestria to send everyone home."

"The way we came in," Harvey interrupted. "Don't forget that part. I've already had nightmares about what happened to the footage of our game. I don't want to be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* with four legs and a saddle. Please."

Golden Wind laughed along with the others, joining them in a familiar embrace. They'd gone through hell—did everything Equestria had asked of them. It was only right that they should go home again.

"Won't be today," he said, slumping back against the hospital bed. "Even if I was feeling well enough, Equestria just won. Princess Twilight might need a little while to make the preparations. I assume Starlight still has the pearl that transformed us lying around somewhere. Could probably change that other warrior who never made it, too—if we can find them again."

She chuckled. "The hippogriffs do, yeah. They're as grateful for the help as Equestria. Won't have to hide from the Storm King under the ocean. But not right now." She glared at the other ponies, her expression turning stern. "He needs to rest. All of you, out. Stay in the castle; you'll get word as soon as we know more about the plans to send you back."

The battle was over, the danger passed. It was finally time to rest.